



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

Royal Commission into Family Violence

Victoria

Early Childhood Australia

About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the national peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood sector. ECA advocates for quality in education and care as well as social justice and equity for children from birth to eight years. We have a federated structure with branches in each state and territory. In 2013, ECA celebrated 75 years of continuous service to the Australian community.



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Introduction

Early Childhood Australia welcomes the Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Children are often the 'forgotten victims' of family violence and may display similar psychological trauma as those children that have been physically abused (UNICEF, 2006).

There is currently a significant gap in family violence prevention programs aimed at children in early childhood (birth to eight years) and their families (Campo, Kaspiew, Moore & Tayton, 2014, p. viii). Early childhood educators working with families and young children receive very limited training in family violence prevention, despite the fact that families with young children are a cohort the research suggests is at higher risk of family violence (Campo, Kaspiew, Moore & Tayton, 2014, p. ix).

ECA believes the Commission has an important opportunity to assess the extent of trauma experienced by children as a result of family violence and raise awareness of the impact of family violence on children in Victoria.

ECA also sees the Commission role as an opportunity to assess the role of preventative responses aimed at children in early childhood as part of a wider strategy to address family violence. Early childhood education and care is one of the largest universal service systems working with families with young children. Over one million families use one or more services and this number is growing every year.

Early childhood services are an important source of support to parents and may often be the 'first to know' agency when problems arise. Early childhood educators often have a relationship of trust with one or both parents with the potential to provide effective referrals to family support and/or family violence services however this is not generally recognised or supported.

Early childhood services can also play a role in supporting family violence prevention over the longer term. In particular we suggest a greater focus on developing positive behaviour in children. We also think that promoting positive relationships between fathers and their children through early childhood education and care services could be effective, building on the emerging evidence about the father's role and family violence prevention.



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Responding to family violence

Over 1.57 million Australian children attend some form of Federal Government funded early childhood service each year—encompassing long day care, family day care and outside school hours care. In addition, 84 per cent of young children attend a preschool program in the year before they start school.

These services and programs provide a significant universal platform for engaging with families affected by, or at risk of, violence. There is the potential to use this interface with children and families as a gateway or soft access point to access a range of other support services. However, ECA believes that early childhood services are often overlooked and underutilised in the identification of strategies to reach out to families and offer intervention or support in response to violence.

ECA notes, for example, that the current Victorian Department of Human Services, Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework and Practice Guides does not include early childhood services in the list of recognised mainstream services that provide an entry point to the family violence service system. We believe that with further support, early childhood educators could play a role in identifying children and families in crisis or experiencing trauma and making formal connections to specialised family violence services.

There is a strong focus on collaborative partnerships with families and communities in the *National Quality Standard* that applies to early childhood education and care services (NQS Quality Area 6). Collaborative partnerships focused on improving outcomes for local children can work towards improving children's development in areas of vulnerability. Early childhood educators can also support families within the service, or in the broader community, to access resources to expand on children's strengths.

Early childhood services already have strong connections with the child protection system whose families and services overlap with the family violence system. Early childhood educators are required to have training in child protection and work with organisations that support and strengthen families. Forging stronger links with the family violence system is a realistic next step in supporting children and families accessing services.

Despite this, there is limited professional development or support to encourage early childhood educators to identify families at risk and to address children's trauma. ECA believes that more training about family violence would raise awareness about its prevalence and impacts and have the potential to increase early identification, effective referral and appropriate responses to children affected.

While the number of children accessing early childhood services is high there are children who miss out, indeed children whose parents are escaping violence or going through parental separation (when the risk of violence can escalate) may be at heightened risk of missing out due to financial difficulties. ECA would like to see improvements in access to Special Child Care Benefit in circumstances involving



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family violence and will be recommending that this be considered in current reforms to the broader Federal Government childcare subsidies.

Recommendations:

- 1. The role of universal early childhood services be better recognised as a potential soft point of entry to the family violence and family support system.**
- 2. Support and training be provided to early childhood educators to increase identification and effective responses to family violence including the trauma experienced by children.**
- 3. Reforms to childcare subsidies include provisions to improve access to subsidies and appropriate programs for children and families affected by family violence.**

Preventing family violence

Gender and sexual development

Early childhood is a critical time when attitudes to gender and sexuality are formed, often before children reach formal schooling. Early Childhood Australia believes that there is a particular opportunity to promote positive and lasting attitudes about equality and diversity among children accessing early childhood services.

Programs aimed at building awareness among early childhood practitioners about gender stereotyping, inequality and attitudes that encourage violence could be developed to support these outcomes.

We see a particular opportunity to embed anti-bias principles in early childhood programming linking with *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework*. In the United States, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has published an anti-bias education framework for early childhood services (NAEYC, 2010) which might be adapted for use in the Australian context.

Recommendations:

- 4. Invest in the development of programs to support positive attitudes to gender and sexual development in young children, to support family violence prevention over the long term.**



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Respectful relationships

Families and educators play an important role in helping children learn about regulating their feelings and behaviour. This approach is supported by the National Children's Commissioner, Megan Mitchell, as an area for further development in the curriculum, 'Kids need to know home shouldn't be a living hell' (the Australian, 20 May).

The *Early Years Learning Framework* has a strong focus on respectful relationships between children, families and educators. However, there is room to further embed these practices through professional development.

Early Childhood Australia believes that there is a particular opportunity to:

- support educators to listen to children, understand their feelings and understand their behaviour
- support children to develop relationships that are non-violent and respectful
- teach young children about how behaviour affects themselves and other people
- help develop, promote and perpetuate equal, safe and respectful relationships.

KidsMatter Early Childhood is a national initiative to support social and emotional wellbeing in early childhood including respectful relationships and emotional regulation. This and other programs warrant recognition as part of the long-term solution to reducing and eliminating family violence.

Recommendations:

- 5. Recognise and support programs that support the development of emotional regulation and respectful relationships in early childhood as long-term strategies to reduce and eliminate family violence.**

Father inclusive practice

It is important to promote a greater role for fathers in the day-to-day care of their children including nurture, care, respect and equality to challenge dominant notions of masculinity which play a key role in men's violence against women. There is some research which suggests that engaging men in their children's lives can reduce the risk of family violence (Pennell, Rikard & Sanders-Rice, 2013; O'Malley, 2013; Bunston, 2013).

Fathers can also have a positive influence in children's successful transition through infancy to adulthood. (Cabrera, Fagan, Wight & Schadler, 2011; Pougnet, Serbin, Stack & Schwartzman, 2011;



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Pears, Kim, Capaldi, Kerr & Fisher, 2012; Herbert, Harvey, Lugo-Candelas & Breaux, 2013; Majdandžić, Möller, de Vente, Bögels & van den Boom, 2014).

ECA believes that there is a particular opportunity to:

- promote the role of fathers in their children’s cognitive and social development
- support fathers to engage in positive child/father relationships and play
- support the role of fathers in children’s successful transition to school.

Currently, there is a lack of resources to support father inclusive practice in early childhood services, which is a sector with few male professionals working in frontline roles. A strategic approach to enhancing father inclusive practice would combine key messages to educators with professional development resources and measures that services could use to assess their performance.

Recommendations:

- 6. Develop a strategic approach to enhance father inclusive practice in early childhood services encompassing information, training and performance measurement.**

Summary of recommendations

- 1. The role of universal early childhood services be better recognised as a potential soft point of entry to the family violence and family support system.**
- 2. Support and training be provided to early childhood educators to increase identification and effective responses to family violence including the trauma experienced by children.**
- 3. Reforms to childcare subsidies include provisions to improve access to subsidies and appropriate programs for children and families affected by family violence.**
- 4. Invest in the development of programs to support positive attitudes to gender and sexual development in young children, to support family violence prevention over the long term.**
- 5. Recognise and support programs that support the development of emotional regulation and respectful relationships in early childhood as long-term strategies to reduce and eliminate family violence.**
- 6. Develop a strategic approach to enhance father inclusive practice in early childhood services encompassing information, training and performance measurement.**



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